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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: RULING PARTY AND OPPOSITION DISCUSS 2011 ELECTIONS, SECURITY
ISSUES WITH AF/E DIRECTOR

REF: 09 DJIBOUTI 1191; 09 DJIBOUTI 1149; 09 DJIBOUTI 1159

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In October 26 discussions with the Minister of the Interior, opposition political parties, and a key member of the ruling coalition, Ambassador and visiting AF/E Director Geeta Pasi discussed the security situation in northern Djibouti, progress on decentralization, and the upcoming 2011 presidential elections. While concerns over isolated Eritrean-trained rebel elements in northern Djibouti remain, influential Djiboutian Afar leaders reportedly have had some success in persuading Djiboutian youths to leave these small groups of Eritrean or Ethiopian-nationality Afars and reintegrate peacefully into their communities. On 2011 elections, opposition leaders reiterated their standard list of preconditions for participation. A key ruling coalition partner said that negotiations on a possible constitutional amendment to allow President Guelleh to run for a third term were still underway, with internal deliberations within each ruling coalition party to be followed with individual meetings with the President later this month. Interlocutors universally praised a recent Embassy event which brought representatives from every legal political party in Djibouti together at the same table to discuss elections systems with a visiting Embassy speaker (ref A). Opposition and coalition alike said that they would welcome more such opportunities, although neither side appeared overly eager to reach out and issue the next invitation. END SUMMARY.

REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS-GIVING UP ON
MORE PROGRESS BEFORE 2011 ELECTIONS?

¶2. (SBU) During an October 26 courtesy call, AF/E Director Pasi told Minister of the Interior Yacin Elmi Bouh that she was glad to visit Djibouti and see first-hand the robust, wide-ranging U.S.-Djibouti partnership. Noting her trip to the southern town of Ali Sabieh the previous day, Pasi said she had been impressed by the strong participation of women in regional government. Minister Bouh noted that increasing women's participation in the political process hinged on increasing their economic independence. The GODJ had spearheaded several initiatives to increase local employment and stimulate economic growth in regional capitals, but was finding it somewhat difficult to secure international financing in the current economic climate. Djibouti needs a fast global recovery to assure continued growth at home, Bouh said.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador noted that while the Regional Councils elected in Djibouti's first-ever regional elections in 2006 had made some

progress during their mandate-for instance in successfully assuming responsibility for civil documents-they seemed to have reached somewhat of a "plateau." Bouh agreed that while "much progress," had been made, other ministries needed to follow the Ministry of the Interior's lead in transferring appropriate competencies from the central to the regional level. Between now and the next regional elections-slated to coincide with presidential elections in 2011-Bouh said, there might not be much more time left to see additional progress in strengthening regional governments.

SECURITY IN THE NORTH-ISOLATED GROUPS

OF ERITREAN-BACKED REBEL ELEMENTS REMAIN?

14. (C) On the security situation in Djibouti, Minister Bouh reminded Ambassador and Pasi that as Djibouti is in a troubled neighborhood, it is always important to remain "vigilant." Bouh said that the GODJ remained concerned about small groups of young people in northern Djibouti who had been trained and "manipulated"

DJIBOUTI 00001277 002 OF 004

by Eritrea. These groups, Bouh said, were "not very important" in number, and were mainly hiding in sparsely-populated, mountainous regions of the north. The GODJ also remained seized with recent grenade incidents (ref B), he said. Eritrea is trying to use Djibouti to get at Ethiopia, Bouh said, and would like to prevent Ethiopian ships from transiting Djibouti, Ethiopia's essential port. "We are a collateral victim" of the Ethiopia-Eritrea dispute, he said.

15. (C) During an October 26 lunch, FRUD (Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy) party President Ali Mohamed Daoud told Pasi that he had been involved in efforts to reach out to a small number of Djiboutian youths who had allied themselves with Eritrean-trained elements in northern Djibouti. (COMMENT. The FRUD clashed with the GODJ during the armed civil conflict of the 1990s, and is now likely the most important ruling-coalition counterweight to the President's RPP (People's Rally for Progress) END COMMENT.) The FRUD, Daoud said, had been among those asked to "lend a hand" in convincing Djiboutian youth to abandon Eritrean-influenced armed groups, and had been glad to do so. Instability is bad for development in northern Djibouti, Daoud said, and discourages potential investors, such as those who might be involved in a planned road project to link Tadjourah to Ethiopia through the remote northwestern communities of Dorra and Balho. In addition, Daoud said, the people "want peace," and are tired of conflict. Daoud said that after combined efforts, a small number of Djiboutian youths had abandoned their rebel groups and come back to live in their own communities. Those who remain hidden in the mountains are foreigners, he said-likely ethnic Afar, but Eritreans or Ethiopians rather than Djiboutians. There do not appear to be "real leaders" among the rebel groups, and it is difficult to know whom to reach out to, he said. In speaking to returned Djiboutian youth, Daoud said it was clear that Eritrea had provided training and equipment.

2011 ELECTIONS-THIRD TERM DISCUSSIONS CONTINUE; AND NOW

WILLINGNESS TO CONTINUE RULING COALITION-OPPOSITION DIALOGUE?

16. (C) Minister Bouh told Pasi and Ambassador that an October 3 Embassy speaker event which brought together all of Djibouti's political parties to discuss proportional representational systems had been a "complete success." It is important that different parties "talk to each other," Bouh said, and the Embassy invitation had allowed for the first exchange of this kind in some time. Ambassador argued that the opposition's full participation in the seminar had proven that they were ready and willing to dialogue with the ruling coalition, and suggested that it might be useful to look for similar opportunities in the future. Bouh said that he was open to continued dialogue, noting that "both sides have a responsibility, and we will try to take ours." There is a long tradition of discussion in Djibouti, Bouh said-"Confrontation of ideas is important," and in the best interests of the people and the country.

17. (C) FRUD President Daoud also praised the October 3 event. He stressed FRUD's willingness to dialogue, and seemed somewhat receptive to suggestions that the FRUD might occasionally serve as an intermediary between the President's RPP and the parties of the opposition coalition. Daoud said that the FRUD planned to meet as a party in early November to formulate an official position on a possible constitutional amendment allowing President Guelleh to run for a third term in office in 2011. President Guelleh had already requested meetings with each coalition party later in the month to discuss the question personally, Daoud said. Daoud said that the FRUD and other parties might still consider presenting their own presidential candidates in 2011. Any constitutional amendment, he stressed, would be part of a larger examination of constitutional reforms, and would have to be validated by a national referendum, although such a referendum is not definitively required under Djiboutian law. At Ambassador's suggestion, Daoud said that the

DJIBOUTI 00001277 003 OF 004

FRUD might be willing to involve the opposition coalition in any discussions of a constitutional amendment.

18. (C) Over tea, opposition coalition leaders from the UAD (Union for a Democratic Alternance) presented Pasi and Ambassador with their long-reiterated list of preconditions for participation in 2011 elections (ref C), including greater involvement of international observers, reexamination of the voters' rolls, and parity participation in the National Election Commission. UDJ (Union for Democracy and Justice) and overall UAD President Ismail Guedi Hared told Pasi that the Djiboutian opposition had been "demonized and criminalized." Hared said that one of his young cousins, also a UDJ member, had recently been arrested near the U.S. Embassy for attempting to distribute a UAD press release, and had been sentenced to two months in prison. (COMMENT. The young man in question, Gouhad Hoch Hared, has reportedly appealed his sentence, but Post is still trying to confirm what offense(s) he was charged with, and will continue to monitor this situation closely. END COMMENT) ARD (Republican Alliance for Democracy) Secretary General Adan Mohamed Abdou and MRD (Movement for Democratic Renewal) Vice-President Souleiman Farah Lodon urged USG support for credible election observers in 2011, noting that Djibouti's small size would mean that a relatively small contingent of observers could go a long way toward increasing confidence in the elections. UAD members noted the difficulty of financing an effective campaign without the ruling party's ability to utilize state resources, and Abdou suggested that the USG might even finance opposition party campaigns. Pasi explained that we supported the democratic process but not individual parties. Ambassador noted that boycotting was a strategy which limited the opposition's options, while Pasi added that "non-participation also has a price for democracy."

¶9. (C) UAD members thanked the Ambassador for having invited them to the October 3 Embassy speaker event. They had been happy for the chance to sit down with ruling coalition party members and welcomed further dialogue, UDJ President Hared said. However, he noted, despite every party's declaration during the seminar that they were "ready for dialogue," the UAD had thus far had no further contact from the ruling coalition. MRD Vice-President Lodon noted that his party-which was banned in 2008 after its President was accused of inviting Eritrea to invade Djibouti- was the only one not invited to the event. Lodon said that while the party ban was under appeal, he considered it "provisional," and that the MRD case was next slated to be heard by the appeals court on November

¶24. UAD members largely rejected the Ambassador's suggestion that they work through informal and family connections to further conversations begun with the ruling coalition parties on October 3. People are afraid to have contact with the opposition, UDJ President Hared said. "We won't waste our time," by pursuing this kind of contact, MRD Vice-President Lodon added, when we know that there is only "one person who makes the decisions in Djibouti."

EVERYBODY READY TO TALK, BUT
WHO MAKES THE FIRST MOVE?

¶10. (C) COMMENT. Both ruling coalition and opposition members seemed sincere in praising the Embassy-organized opportunity to meet face-to-face on somewhat "neutral" ground, during the visit of an academic speaker. What remains to be seen is if anybody will find it politically expedient to follow through on their public declarations of willingness to dialogue. In conversations with GODJ officials, ruling coalition, and the opposition, Post will continue to stress that it is in everybody's interest to continue such discussions, with a view toward 2011 elections that both the Djiboutian people and the international community can accept as transparent, representative, and as participative as possible. In northern Djibouti, the GODJ remains seized both with the stalemated Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute, and with ongoing reports of infiltration by Eritrean-influenced elements. Post will continue to monitor this situation closely. END SUMMARY.

DJIBOUTI 00001277 004 OF 004

¶11. (U) AF/E Director Pasi cleared this message.
SWAN